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SUBJECT: ABANDONED BOATS STOKE FEARS OF LTTE OPERATIVES FLEEING INTO INDIA

11. (SBU) Summary: Six abandoned Sri Lankan boats, some marked with bullet holes and blood stains, recently washed up on Tamil Nadu shores. Tamil Nadu police claim the boats drifted to India after a recent cyclone, but this explanation has not convinced Indian Navy officials. Security analysts suspect that members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) abandoned the boats after fleeing from Sri Lanka to India. The unexplained Sri Lankan boats on Indian soil reinforce the serious concerns about India's capacity to protect its coastline in the wake of the Mumbai terrorist attacks. End summary.

Abandoned Sri Lankan boats wash ashore in Tamil Nadu

12. (SBU) Between November 19 and December 5, local fishermen found at least six (some newspapers reported eight) Sri Lankan boats drifting offshore near Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu (the point in India closest to Sri Lanka). Three of the boats reportedly had bullet marks and one had dry blood stains. All but one of the boats had been stripped of its outboard engines. Law enforcement authorities inspected the boats and took them into custody. According to media reports, police officers said such a large number of abandoned Sri Lankan boats have never washed ashore before.

13. (SBU) The abandoned boats triggered speculation of infiltration into India by LTTE fighters escaping the war in Sri Lanka. Some reporters suggested that injured LTTE operatives might have used the boats to travel to Tamil Nadu to receive medical treatment. (Note: The consensus view is that it is unlikely that these boats were used by Sri Lankan refugees who abandoned them upon arrival. Refugees from Sri Lanka have no incentive to surreptitiously enter India as the government accepts them as a matter of course, even going so far as to make welfare payments to properly registered refugees. End note.)

Police deny LTTE angle

14. (SBU) On December 10, a police official told the media that "a thorough investigation conducted along with sister agencies revealed that the boats had apparently drifted from Sri Lanka due to the recent cyclone." He claimed that the boats "were not being used for any activity subversive to the nation's security as reported in certain sections of the media."

Indian Navy disagrees; says state probe is ongoing

15. (SBU) Vice Admiral N.K. Varma of the Indian Navy's Eastern Command, who was on a "routine inspection of the naval detachment" at Ramanathapuram on December 11, told the press that it is hardly possible that the storm carried the boats from Sri Lanka to India. He noted that the engines had been removed from the boats, saying further details would become available after the state government completes its investigations. He added that although there is no threat from the LTTE to India, the Indian Navy would strengthen its surveillance of the Indian seas.

Analysts believe terrorists might have crossed over

¶6. (SBU) A retired Indian Navy Commodore who, among many other assignments, commanded a patrol vessel during India's peacekeeping operation in Sri Lanka during the late 1980s, told post the "number of boats turning up is quite alarming." Disputing the police explanation that the boats had been abandoned during the recent cyclone, the Commodore said he believes someone was using the weather as cover to land in India and abandon their boats. "In light of the situation on the island (Sri Lanka)," he said, he presumes that LTTE fighters used the boats to escape Sri Lanka and then abandoned them upon arrival in India.

¶7. A retired Indian Army intelligence officer who also served in India's peacekeeping operation and still follows closely events on the island nation, was more emphatic in rejecting the police explanation. When asked why the abandoned boats turned up in Tamil Nadu he laughed (presumably at our naivete) and quickly replied that he had no doubt LTTE operatives used the vessels to escape from Sri Lanka to India. He believes the fleeing LTTE operatives likely came for medical treatment in Tamil Nadu, joking that they could easily get some "R&R" in state. He surmised that private medical clinics in Tamil Nadu would have no problem providing treatment for injured LTTE fighters if the price was right.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: The inability of the Indian security forces to interdict or even explain convincingly the presence of these boats assumes greater importance as it comes shortly after the amphibious entry of the Mumbai terrorists raised serious questions about India's ability to protect its coast line. The state police's quick, public conclusion that the boats just washed ashore after the

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cyclone likely stems from a desire to avoid the potentially explosive conclusion that LTTE operatives are turning up in Tamil Nadu. If evidence comes to light that the boats transported LTTE fighters, the state's ruling DMK will face charges that it has been soft on terror at a time when the issue is front and center in the minds of the electorate. Such evidence will also force the government to take some sort of action to show it is taking terrorism seriously, which will expose it to criticism from the state's small, but vocal pro-Sri Lankan Tamil lobby. As a result, we expect the state to continue to downplay the matter. Nonetheless, we will continue to follow the issue closely given the serious security implications of having LTTE fighters moving about Tamil Nadu. End comment.

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